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Director of Photography

It's all about triggering emotion via imagery. When I convey the very essence of a situation with a single photograph, then I am complete, because the viewer understands more than the moment, they know the situation.

AVA ROSALES

Features Editor

I am the Caribbean.

DYLAN BENOIT

Contributor

I'm a chef with Champagne taste and a beer budget, but always seem to find myself surrounded by the most amazing people in the most amazing places. From eating termites in the Honduran jungle to learning how to make dim sum in Hong Kong, for me treasure is in the story.

JEFFREY SOBEL

Co-Editor-in-Chief

All I need is a book, a bourbon and a boat to a new destination - I'll be just fine.

MICHAEL SOBEL

Contributor

Time passes like wind on my cheeks. However, with each new travel experience, there is a rebirth. New personal growth and new friends no matter what stage of life.

- Michael Sobel

SERGIO OLIVARES

Creative Direction

I'm my best on this island. My flight left last night, but I know I'm not going back home.

NEW & Noteworthy

BY AVA ROSALES

DOMINICA

Nature lovers or travelers wanting a unique experience away from the hustle and bustle of your "new norm", this is the escape for you! ***Coulibri Ridge***'s spacious, residential style 14-suite resort opened on October 22 and is nestled atop a mountain ridge in southern Dominica on 285 acres of unspoiled land, affording the resort the ability to harness eco-friendly and sustainable resources of the sun, wind and rain. An eco-tourist's haven! This resort is completely off-grid and self-sustaining. Imagine an experience no other resort in the region offers – your electricity generated by solar panels and wind turbines, while your water for bathing and lounging in chlorine-free pools is collected from the rain and purified by ultraviolet light and copper ionization. In 2023, the resort is set to open its own farm that will also be irrigated from collected and filtered water from the resort, so nothing goes to waste.

Even the building is constructed from hand-chiseled rocks sourced from the property, along with recycled teak wood, and ceilings constructed from 100% recyclable, mold-resistant aluminum. The resort's clean, modern design and location intentionally allows guests to experience nature fully. Whether it's vistas of clear blue skies or the pristine waters of Soufrière Bay, where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Caribbean Sea, or the lush surrounding mountainside flora and fauna and the foliage brought indoors, nature is all around to be seen and experienced.

There is also nothing but space – space to rejuvenate and relax, without getting underfoot of each other or fellow travelers. Coulibri Ridge boasts four categories of spacious residential-style suites complete with full kitchens. The Seaview Studio offers 600 square-feet of interior space and a 350-foot terrace. Flop into your sofa, hanging chair

and let the sea breeze gently sway your cares away with spectacular views of the Caribbean Sea. The Morne Fou Loft is 950 square-feet of interior space and a 400-square feet sea view terrace. The luxurious Sky Penthouse duplexes provide 1,000 square-feet of interior space and two terraces – one overlooking the sea, Martinque and the Morne Fou mountain peak, and a second overlooking the lush Sulphur Spring Valley. The four Sky Penthouses feature the always sought-after outdoor rain shower, and three have private infinity pools with views that don't get much better anywhere else.

Although the property is secluded, self-sustaining and on its own grid, guests can choose to remain connected to the gridded, outside world through two boardrooms or the complimentary high speed WiFi – or not. After all, time could be much better spent on a reclusive vacation swimming in infinity pools, taking in a class or two in the yoga pavilion or indulging in a pampered spa treatment. It almost feels like you are situated so close to heaven, the sky's the limit at Coulibri Ridge.

www.coulbriridge.com

Beyond THE Beach IN CAYMAN

WE TOOK A QUICK BUSINESS TRIP…

to Grand Cayman to chat about travel and tourism in the region at the first in-person event to take place since the start of the pandemic. It was exciting to sit with the heads of state of virtually every country in the Caribbean. Chatting about the potential of increased inter-island travel and the strengths and beauty of each destination was incredible. Having the opportunity to sit with and chat with Ministers and Directors of tourism while exchanging impactful and meaningful concepts about the travel and hospitality industry was invigorating. As we all floated ideas and traded humorous barbs about who has the best this and which island has the best that, there was the common thread that we were all Caribbean and that speaks volumes.

I think 2023 and beyond will see tremendous change, for the better, throughout the Caribbean. While keeping a keen and hopeful eye out for some increased inter-island travel, our current location was not lost on the editor in me. This meeting could not have been an email, and I thank you for that! We stayed at the Ritz Carlton…if you've been before you know of its amazing location and status as the Grand Dame on the island, but did you know the resort underwent a magnificent beautification only last year? So whether you've been or not, you need to go check in and stay for a while.

Although I was there for only a few days, beyond the meetings and beyond the gorgeous beach, I was able to take in some precious sites that I somehow skipped on previous visits. I strolled through the stalagmite and glistening stalactite with two guides who were part of the excavation team that opened up these caves. As the tour wended its way through the crystal formations, down to a still lake, I heard about the gentle process of moving mountains-worth of stone to unearth these paths of geological treasures. The crystal

caves are something that hadn't crossed my mind until the lovely concierge team at the Ritz brought them to my attention and I am glad they did. My go to, Stingray City, was the island attraction I skipped this time around. I truly wanted to see a different side of Cayman, beyond the beach.

That in mind, my next stop was Pedro St. James Castle or Pedro's Castle which is the oldest existing stone building in all of the Cayman Islands. The romance of this historic spot lingers heavily on the salt air as the waves crash against the rocky shore at the edge of its manicured lawn. The 18 inch thick walls were erected in 1780 to a height of three stories, and I bet that if those walls could talk, the stories they could tell would keep us on the edges of our seats. I can imagine sitting on one of its sweeping verandahs, looking out to sea as the breeze lulled me into a dreamy state while listening to tales of old. Instead, I will swipe a few paragraphs from their story and tell a bit of its history here.

"In the late 18th century, the population of the Cayman Islands was approximately 500 people and Grand Cayman was little more than an undeveloped fishing village. With the use of slave labour, it was an Englishman named William Eden who built the expansive Great House and farmed the adjoining land as a plantation.

Since its construction more than two centuries ago, Pedro St. James has been put to a variety of uses, including a courthouse, jail, Government Assembly and restaurant. Surviving hurricanes, fires, vandalism, and rumors of being jinxed, it stands today, in its restored state, as a dynamic piece of Caymanian heritage.

Perhaps best known as the "Birthplace of Democracy in the Cayman Islands", Pedro St. James was the venue for a meeting on 5 December 1831 where the decision was made to form the first elected parliament. Later, on 3 May 1835, Robert Thompson, sent from the Governor of Jamaica, held court at Pedro St. James to issue the proclamation ending slavery in the British Empire.

This place feels like walking through a time capsule, and eating a delicious lunch and having a rum tasting only feet away from the castle itself, felt right. Something about that felt as though I were personally moving things into the 21st century. Cheers to visiting this fun slice of history.

Visiting Cayman, beyond the beach, was a nice way to never tire of this island. Knowing that the island's sandy hangouts were only steps away from my suite at the hotel was enough for me. Seeing some unique sides of this island gave it a bit more depth. In the grand scheme of Caribbean destinations competing for traveler's attention, it's nice to know that there's more to a place than a rum drink and lapping waves.

NEXT TIME, STINGRAYS.

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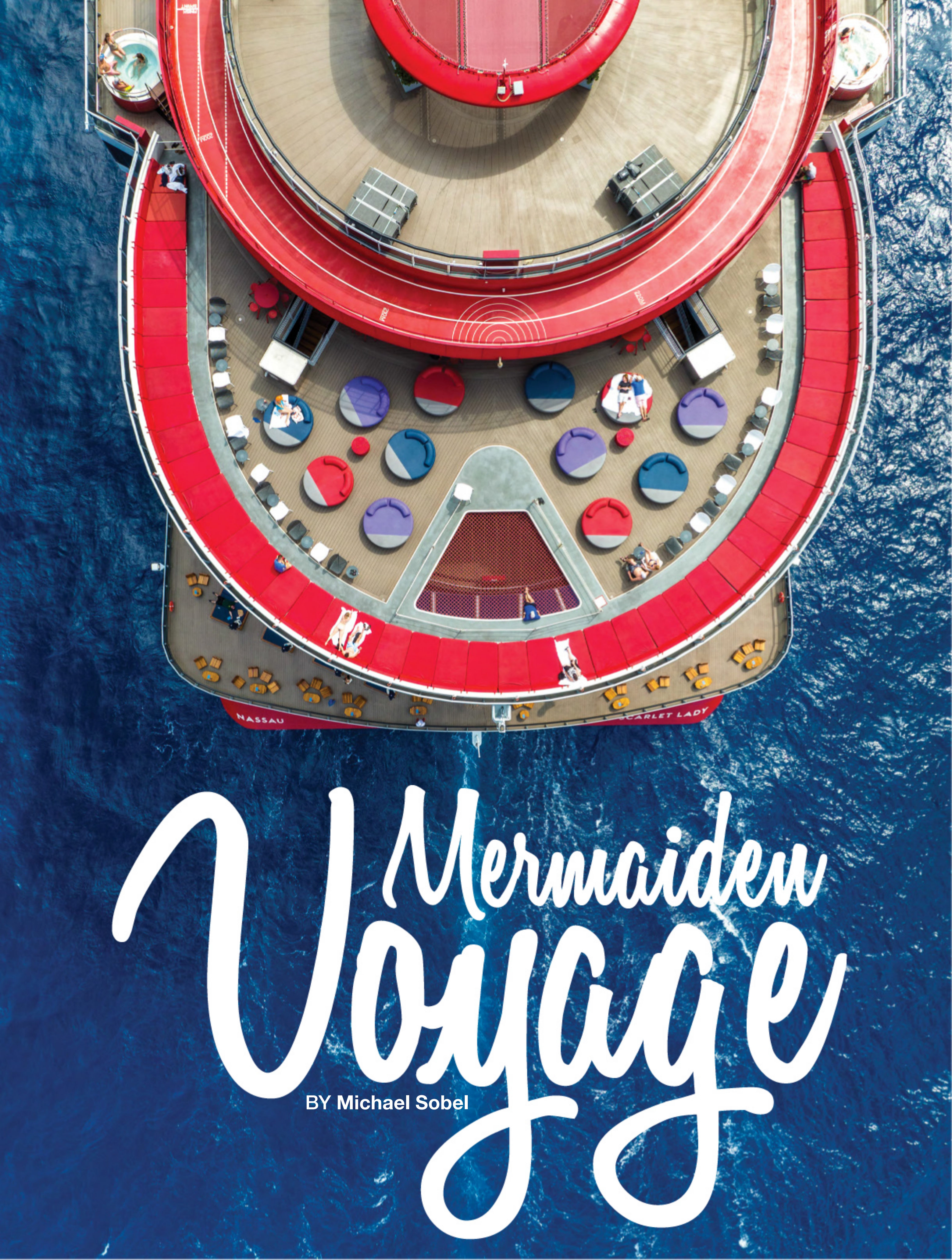

NASSAU
SCARLET LADY

Mermaiden Voyage

BY Michael Sobel

Imagine being asked if you want to spend six days on the MerMaiden launch of the Virgin Valiant Lady from Miami, traveling to Honduras, Mexico, and the Bahamas, while wearing extravagant Halloween costumes with the legendary British billionaire, Sir Richard Branson onboard. It took me about three seconds to say, "Hell yes!"

Oh, and did I mention Virgin Voyages is adults only! If I repeat that several more times, it's not a typo. Having experienced countless cruises in the past, this is my first adult only experience and I'm just so excited! Don't get me wrong, I love children in real life, but maybe not so much on vacation.

The ship's dress code is casual, comfortable, or whatever you want it to be. I didn't need my usual motion sickness patch due to the unique stabilization design of the massively wide hull of the ship. I was rocking, but not due to the generally steady Lady. The Valiant Lady spent the summer bouncing around Europe from Ibiza and Italy, to the French Rivera. The ship was built and designed for passenger comfort, specialty dining experiences, with no interior cabins (you read that correctly), while being energy and environmentally efficient.

Cheeky Rockstar Suites, (if you're lucky enough to reserve one before they're all booked), come with a twenty-four hour a day 'Rockstar Agent' to be at the sailor's beck and call, a fully stocked mini fridge, with the first drink on the house, a turntable with a variety of vinyl records, and access to Richard's Rooftop, the private forward deck bar and exclusive outdoor relaxation area.

The Muster Station was even fun in my assigned location: the casino. Instead of having to wait for the entire group, a very friendly crew member did a demonstration to about a dozen people at a time, so that I completed the task in a few minutes and could leave to enjoy my new cruise adventure. Finding my way around the ship was super easy after I figured out that the three main sections and elevators were color-coded in either blue, purple or red. Even the stripe-colored carpet provided a steady pathway to my onboard destinations.

Shortly after finding my luxury tenth floor balcony suite, I was greeted by our cabin host named 'Yoga' (his real name) from Bali. I asked how he liked working on Virgin Voyages versus all the other cruise lines he's been with, and his instant reply was, "I can be myself here. I can wear my hair long, or my ears pierced, or my tattoos showing, and it is wonderful."

The same sentiment was expressed by nearly every crew member I encountered. Virgin crew members are happy campers from the top down. Consummate hospitality professionals - euphoric, competent, experienced, well-trained, and helpful crew members certainly added much to the trip's enjoyment. Yoga, our constantly smiling, crackerjack cabin agent, showed my wife and I how to use all the gadgets in the room. Everything is controlled by a small tablet: from the air temperature, color of lighting, to the dining reservations and room service.

It was a very modern, spacious, and fresh-looking cabin, with attention to detail, a huge bathroom shower (two-person capacity) and every high-tech amenity imaginable, including interior drapes that automatically open and close when exiting or entering the room to maintain temperature consistency and help with energy conservation.

"Social responsibility and sustainability are what we (Virgin) do," said Anders Karlsson, Vice President of Hotel Operation. He added, "Even our toilet paper is treeless. It's made from sugarcane residue…They even give us a monthly environmental impact report," said Karlsson.

There were no plastic water bottles onboard to pollute the seas, just carafes of freshwater which kept us hydrated. Absolutely nothing is mundane or typical on this Virgin Lady ship. The overall interior design is unmatched. Every detail has been planned by cruise industry experts with extreme precision and forethought. From the moment you enter the ship the difference is literally palpable.

Embarking through the double glass-doors, the fresh surroundings can be felt immediately. The massive lobby circular ceiling light fixture is designed to be a compass flashing different colors, except for a steady beam of red pointing north. A live DJ plays Virgin vinyl record vibes to your left, (your favorite vinyl's are for sale), and to your right is the Lick Me Till Ice Cream, with a dozen exotically delicious homemade flavors.

There are no massive dining rooms onboard with fixed early or late times for buffet or banquet style eating, as with traditional cruise lines. Generally, there is no waiting for a Michelin-inspired meal any time of day in one of the six specialty cuisine restaurants with distinctive cuisines developed by several previous Michelin awarded chefs, including Razzle Dazzle (Veggie-Forward); The Wake (Steak and Seafood); Extra Virgin (Italian); Pink Agave (Mexican); Gunbae (Korean BBQ); and Test Kitchen (Experimental).

'The Dock' eatery (indoors and outdoors) was my favorite place for snacking in between meals. Located at the front of the ship, The Dock provided wide-ranging top shelf liquor selections, healthy juices, large-size couches for lounging, scrumptious Mediterranean bites, and live music.

Food options in virtually every venue on the ship were not only appetizing and healthy, but also works of art. It was comical looking around at every meal watching the sailors (passengers) pull out their phones for a foodie snapshot as is standard protocol before indulging in each delectable dish. On Virgin Voyages, I do not have to pay extra for specialty boutique cuisine restaurants, it's standard and included. When it comes to fine dining, extravagance and elegance are the Virgin norm.

Are you ready for this?

Using the Virgin App on my iPhone, I absolutely loved that I could shake in it in my hand three times to order a bottle of champagne delivered directly to me anywhere on the ship using GPS technology. I was never without access to a bottle of Moët (always under $100.00) and popcorn for snacking. The app even made a cork popping sound when ordering and shaking my phone. Cheers to technology!

Every restaurant has such a different look and feel, each with their own specialty menu created by award winning chefs. Wide-ranging quality is delivered in the dining establishments at every meal. Virgin Voyages' Valiant Lady is where chefs and foodies go to play. In addition, somebody else's "cute" baby is never going to start screaming at the table right next to me, while I enjoy devouring the most divine antipasto romaine and Friese salad (white anchovies, crotons, six-minute egg), grilled Mediterranean sea bass (with lemon, roasted fennel and Yukon gold potato) and potato gnocchi (hen of the woods mushrooms, spinach, truffle butter sauce), that I have ever tasted at the Extra Virgin restaurant (Italian cuisine).

My server, Andriea, wheeled tableside a goodie cart full of homemade gelatos and condiments to craft the most heavenly and flavorful Affogato to ever touch my lips, adding meringue bits, espresso, pine nuts and vanilla gelato.

On the very first night I had the pleasure of dining with a group of fellow writers when suddenly Sir Richard Branson sat down at the table right next to me and joined us at the dimly lit, elegant and super-cool authentic Mexican restaurant, Pink Agave.

I was trying to keep my composure while our incredible server, Gustavo, kept bringing an onslaught of appetizers and exotic libations for the table to share. He began spontaneously laughing aloud, announcing each unique

and delicious dish. His laughter was contagious and spread like a wildfire amongst the small group.

During a pause in the excitement over our surprise guest, I asked Sir Richard about his debate situation in Singapore regarding the death penalty, his short stint on the acclaimed television series Shark Tank, and why he decided to pursue the competitive cruise industry with Virgin?

He said without hesitation, "I felt it was clear that there had to be a better way for me and my family to enjoy a cruise experience than what the traditional cruise lines offered."

Having experienced firsthand the ultimate pleasure of being on the Valiant Lady's Virgin Miami launch, I couldn't agree more. Strolling around this ship at night felt very cool, neat, and happening all at the same time.

The light show and live dancers in the 'Red Room' were entertaining a large crowd, a gentle-sounding flutist was charming the 'On the Rocks' bar patrons, while my late-night cravings were satisfied at 'The Pizza Place', which only serves individual size personal pizzas, not by the slice, to maintain the perfectly oven-baked flavor and texture of the crust.

The Valiant Lady has so many comfortable and colorful nooks and crannies to hideaway for some quiet time to read a book or share a bottle of bubbly with a special person. My favorite: the Sip Lounge. One day at sea, I tried a romantic rendezvous at the afternoon high tea in the Sip Lounge. At the reasonable price of twenty dollars per person, or thirty-five dollars if you want to add a flute of bubbly, the server brought us an assortment of delectable finger sandwiches and pastries. I am not a big tea drinker, but I must admit I got lost in the moment. I even felt like a better person after trying the mint green tea.

The menu has a historical narrative in the footnote describing the development of different teas and cultures throughout the centuries. In typical Virgin fashion, the emphasis is on selecting sourcing partners that do not use pesticides and synthetic fertilizers to grow the teas. Virgin looks for partners in the supply chain that maximize the ecosystem by ensuring that tea bushes are planted adequately apart in some of the most pristine areas of the world. It is comforting to know all that, while enjoying the buzz and sweets.

Whatever your preferred spirit may be, it was fully stocked and available at the Sip Lounge. The Cellar Selection includes champagne (magnums and sparkling), cognacs, beer, wine, and specialty cocktails at very reasonable prices. My favorite cocktail was the Double Agent (Aviation gin, Benedictine, yuzu liqueur, chamomile, thyme). It goes down smooth with a complement of Caviar Dreams, the Siberian Osetra Caviar on a Buckwheat Blini (Meyer lemon, saffron fluid gel).

The seemingly magical all-purpose Virgin Voyages waterproof wristband not only unlocks my cabin front door, serves as my sailor identification for disembarking and embarking the ship at ports of call, but it is also a very convenient charging mechanism for any extras ordered and shop purchases onboard throughout the cruise.

The mandatory safety video when boarding has been choreographed with music and Robert Palmer-style female dancers (Addicted to Love video) donning identical red miniskirts and thigh high leather boots singing catchy lyrics to explain the safety maritime rules. I danced along while watching my mandatory maritime safety video in my cabin. A first!

Any sailors that failed to watch the required safety video were reminded over the ship's intercom not to be "naughty" and to do so. One scene shows a gorgeous singer getting a tattoo, likely from the onboard tattoo shop cleverly named: 'Squid Ink'. The Squid Ink is a unique addition to the Virgin experience, as advertised, "making (and marking) memories."

Bigger is most certainly not always better in the cruise industry. The newly constructed mid-sized Valiant Lady has capacity for about 2,770 passengers and 1,160 crew members. A perfect vacation fit for my comfort and pleasure. Unlike many of the giant cruise line floating cities, I never felt crowded onboard the (VV) Lady waiting in lines for food, pool chairs or a show seat.

MOËT
MOËT & CHANDON

Oh, and did I mention all Virgin Voyages are kid-free? Hysterical!

Perhaps the idea behind an adult only cruise is for some of us the ability to be a kid again ourselves in the 'Social Club'. The game room was filled with lots of grown-ups painting, sewing, playing pinball games, air hockey, eating specialty grilled hotdogs and drinking soda pop, putting together jigsaw puzzles, or challenging new friends to foosball.

The Virgin Voyages' shore excursions are aptly named "Shore Things" in Roatán (Honduras), Costa Maya (Mexico) and Bimini (Bahamas). Something for everyone and hassle-free, fully refundable, (if canceled at least twenty-four hours in advance of the start). Look for the Shore Thing operators that have third-party certification based on the Global Sustainable Tourism Council criteria, like the Adrenaline Zip-Line Adventure in Roatán.

Sometimes when I book a cruise at the last minute, like I did this time, I miss out on some of my preferred Shore Excursions that are already fully booked. As an experienced traveler, I maneuvered my way at the Roatán port, through the jitney barkers vying for attention. I found a local cabbie driver that spoke some English and had an air-conditioned taxi.

My taxi driver Angel asked for a sixty-dollar fare in advance that I was happy to pay. I expressed in broken Spanish and botched English that I wanted him to take me not so much to the common tourist spots, but rather the local places that gave him prideful feelings of his hometown, Roatán.

He smiled joyfully and showed me his young daughter's picture in her First Communion white dress sitting on his dashboard. He said, "Her name is Angelina," as his face beamed with pride. I immediately bonded with Angel as we embarked on an incredible adventure, starting with a quick stop and sugar high at the local chocolate factory.

We then took an endlessly narrow and winding road, twisting and turning up the mountains, viewing rustic buildings, wild dogs roaming the streets, and scenes only familiar to less developed but proud areas, lining each side of the dirt road.

Learning about the real culture, countryside and lifestyle is what makes me happy on a trip. After arriving at the highest mountain top, we took several selfies overlooking an utterly breathtaking panoramic view of the island's jungles and coastline.

Then Angel drove me through his neighborhood to see the local school, his church, and the place where his family buys their groceries. He was excited to narrate his connection with the buildings and places that were his life.

In just a matter of minutes he had me back in the thick woods and headed into a private monkey sanctuary called Eden. I began my walking tour up and down the hills, following a path, and greeting various native animals, explaining the flora and fauna and different butterfly species. I played around with a host of friendly spider monkeys, a wild piglet roaming the woods for food, and let a brightly feathered toucan sit on my shoulders. I then encountered a large sloth on the ground. He let me pick him up in my arms, cuddling him like a baby, and gave me the sweetest hug. He was a darling, gentle, slow-moving sloth that the locals named, Eduardo.

Then I walked across a steep and rickety wooden suspension bridge that crossed about a quarter mile above the thick island jungle. A mystical and somewhat scary jungle experience that I'll treasure. Strangely, I felt as though Johnnie Weissmuller, (the original Tarzan) one of my childhood heroes, was watching out for me in the island jungle.

After my self-made Shore Excursion, Angel opened my car door, as the handle was broken from the inside, and I handed him a generous gratuity. He hugged me and then asked if he could take a selfie with me in front of his taxicab. I said, "Of course!"

Virgin
VIRGIN VOYAGES
Virgin
VALIANT LADY
NASSAU

Back on the ship I lounged at Richard's Rooftop private deck area and bar, soaked in the spa, suntanned with a glass of Chardonnay and meandered to The Dock eatery and lounge to enjoy the warm sea breeze, a bottle of Moët and chilled out listening to a live 70's music and song performance.

After a fun pick-up game with a couple friendly sailors of 'Scoop There It Is' in the always-casual Social Club, I snacked on a delicious marshmallow and cheese hotdog with a designer drink called 'Skinny Pie' made with Vodka, key lime pie, limoncello and wafer. Yum and yummy!

For sailors and mermaids who seek a more tranquil and cultural adventure, be sure to try the certified Trifecta Tour of Roatán. A five hour, three stop expedition around the island that includes a traditional dory boat in Oak Ride through the peaceful mangrove tunnels.

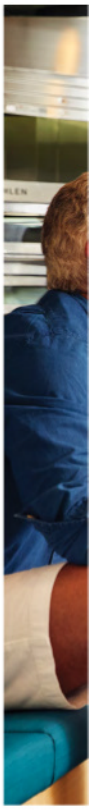
Every Shore Thing adventure in Roatán provides indescribable selfie opportunities for posts on your favorite social media sites that will make your closest friends green with envy.

The ship captain just announced a change in direction was happening tomorrow for safety reasons due to the unexpected path of a tropical storm. We had to turn off course and skip Costa Maya to dock in Cozumel, Mexico instead. Everyone onboard was busy having too much fun to notice or care.

The planned Shore Things for Costa Maya were automatically cancelled on my Virgin app, and a whole new set of exciting excursions were immediately posted for the new destination.

People on board, including staff and guests alike, were beaming with happiness that only comes from hobnobbing on a truly luxurious and hospitable fantasy getaway. Everyone I met on the ship was so authentically friendly. For example, Sudi, a server at the 'On The Rocks' cocktail bar that served drinks to over eight hundred sailors today. When I went back the following evening, Sudi remembered what I had ordered from him the night before. It was like a magic trick. An astonishing example of personal service and premier hospitality.

It's always so much fun when I bond with a group of strangers at the blackjack table, with varying degrees of inebriation, fist-bumping and high-fiving, who are all in the same zone and mindset, and as a bonus, celebrating loudly with everyone's winning hands.



YOU
WANNA
PIZZA
ME?

Some nights naturally ended at 'The Pizza Place' to savor a scrumptious, scientifically tested fresh pizza crust, of either oven baked 'White Truffle and Egg' (mozzarella, cracked black pepper, tomato sauce), 'Pepperoni,' or a 'Pretty Fly for a White Pie' (mozzarella, ricotta parmesan, roasted garlic, oregano), and then head back to the cabin with a sugar cone filled with scoops of Malted Strawberry Milk Shake and Raspberry Beet ice cream.

Midway through the cruise there suddenly appeared brightly colored sea creatures and giant octopus tentacles hung all throughout the vessel. I heard it was to celebrate Virgin's signature Scarlet Night. Everyone was asked to wear something red. I had no idea what Scarlet Night meant, except perhaps another reason to get dressed up in something sexy and dance the night away in 'The Manor', a high energy disco venue. It felt festive and different, perhaps Virgin's version of a formal night.

I was fortunate enough to sit down for an in-person interview with both Sir Richard Branson (entrepreneur and business magnate who controls over 400 companies in various areas), and Tom McAlpin, CEO and President of Virgin Voyages (Florida State University Alumni and former CEO of The World, a privately owned residential ship and former President of Disney Cruises).

I asked, "What's the end game for Virgin Voyages? Is there a Mission and how would you describe the Fleet Branding?" Sir Richard was quick to point out that, "The intention was never to build something that was right for everyone, but rather to build a cruise line that provided the best of everything for those targeted individuals who seek this kind of personal service and special luxury."

His goal in general, I gathered, is always to make sure the world is somehow deriving benefits from his companies, directly or indirectly, whether helping the people of Ukraine, climate change, Earth conservation, or promoting clean energy.

Tom McAlpin added, "We're creating something special. This inaugural launch from Miami of the Valiant Lady is only our second ship. In May 2023, we plan to launch the Resilient Lady (a perfect name as she was built during the pandemic), and a fourth ship christened the Brilliant Lady will hit the seas by the end of 2023. Eventually, we imagine ten to fifteen ships in the Virgin fleet."

These midsize ships are designed for personal comfort and to meet the demands of sailors seeking a distinct extraordinary experience.

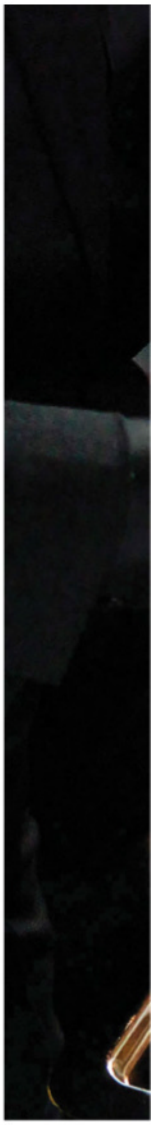
"The brand purpose of Virgin is always to change business for the good. It's part of the DNA for every Virgin business. Creating the right culture with a brand purpose, which is an epic sea change for all," said McAlpin. He added, "A perfect example is the dining experience on Virgin that is like no other."

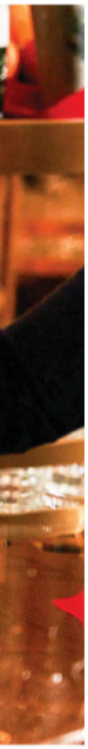
Talk about unique design engineering concepts, (for us nerds) I enjoyed learning about the 'Red Room', where many of the entertainment performances took place, some interactive with the audience. With comfortable stair seating (fully retractable from both sides) of the alley in the middle, depending on the type of shows, the intimate stage can be quickly transformed into a completely new looking venue.

The entire performance facility can be reconfigured within twenty minutes to accommodate all types of entertainment, from a wild nightclub dance party to a Magician, or acrobatics, plays and live music performances. The room transformation is super cool to watch.

One evening I entered the Red Room to enjoy a breathtaking performance called 'Dual Reality'. Twelve gorgeous looking buff acrobats combined Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Las Vegas' style Cirque de Solei, with juggling, gymnastics, song, and dance to express the true meaning of love.

Three standing ovations from the audience were well deserved. I must take another cruise just to see that performance again. Amazing creativity and charm!





The marquee restaurant for me is 'The Wake', located in the rear of the ship. My table for both brunch and dinner provided a bird's eye view perch just over the engine's wake in the ocean. I was hypnotically mesmerized gazing into the wake, a kind of a trace on the water's surface, as I dined on a five-star quality meal.

I started brunch with a cinnamon glazed raisin pastry, then steak and eggs (potato rosti, braised swiss chard, topped with bordelaise sauce), and crêpe cake (pistachio crumble, strawberry and rhubarb compote).

Later at dinner I salivated on the clam chowder (yukon gold potato, bacon, chive batons), wedge salad (smoked bacon, baby gem lettuce, blue cheese), 'The Wake' dish (crispy pork belly, sautéed spinach, bone marrow bollandaise), with a side of twice-baked potato and caramelized onions, and for dessert, Meyer lemon cheesecake (blueberry compote and cinnamon cookie crumble).

The full-flavored hits just keep on coming at The Wake.

Not only did the itinerary call for the ship's first ever Sirens and Sailors Halloween Costume Ball, but a Shore Thing (excursion) was planned in Bimini, Bahamas, at Virgin's Voyages exclusive Beach Club to break the Guinness Book World Record for the largest number of Merfolk (mermaids and mermen) at one place. Most certainly, a monumental milestone worth striving to achieve!

Yes, they did officially break the world mermaid record with 457 merfolk all cheering in one place! Luckily, there was an official Guinness Book representative and a documentary video crew on sight to record history in the making. I had not witnessed anything this meaningful for humanity since Commander Neil Armstrong first walked on the moon. Okay, maybe it didn't arise to the level of footprints on the moon, but it sure was a blast and sight to behold!

Sitting in my private Beach Club poolside cabana, listening to the live DJ, watching blue skies, cotton clouds, and pretty people dancing around a street block-long lagoon sized pool, I wondered to myself, could the day get any better than this?

There are literally hundreds of Virgin sailors and crew dancing in the sunny beach front pool lagoon surrounded by exquisite natural beauty. I must assume this is the real paradise island.

There seems to be a whole team of thong clad crew members dancing and gyrating to Donna Summer and Pit Bull. They're all spinning to the music with bubble makers aimed towards the pool, squirt cannons, and throwing dozens of large multi-colored different shaped floats into the pool.

My goodness, where do I apply for these crew jobs?

It was a fairytale ending to an exciting, fun-filled vacation. I'll find it difficult to go on another cruise line again after having been spoiled by the Virgin Voyages Valiant Lady of the sea.

McAlpin, President and CEO, told me that 30% of Virgin Voyages sailors are first time cruise passengers, while 40% book another Virgin cruise onboard before they leave the ship. It speaks volumes to the Virgin experience.

This is what a cruise is supposed to be like. I have been cruising for decades and Virgin Voyages took me to a whole new level of vacation enjoyment.

Michael Sobel

IT TAKES A VILLA

A new space powered by ItTakesAVilla.net

Villa Bamidele

South Coast, Jamaica

We are all about villas in this department. The lovely thing about Caribbean villas is that you can experience true Caribbean living while vacationing and that's our first and last name. The essence of a destination may get lost in a big resort setting but in a villa it is often inescapable. Don't get me wrong, there are some that transport you to some otherworldly places, but we are talking about those that have a firm grasp on the luxurious side of a specific destination. For an immersive travel experience, you can't beat staying in a luxury villa. We checked into Villa Bamidele on Jamaica's southern coast near the quiet White House fishing village. I was going to say something clever to start this piece but it seems they beat me to it in their website's opening paragraph. "Inhale salubrious sea breeze from your own personal beach bar while toasting flamboyant sunsets-- each one, a resplendent celebration of nature's glory." These adjectives are far from flowery when it comes to describing this South Coast synthesis of sublime swank.

Just because it sleeps 20, extremely comfortably, doesn't mean it is not intimate and trust me when I tell you that guests are well-served. The main villa hosts guests throughout its glorious six bedroom suites while the four one-bedroom cottages that surround the main sleep an additional eight lucky travelers. I went down with my fiancé and dreamed of hosting our wedding on one of the lawns, throwing the cocktail portion of the reception down by the bar & grill before hitting the dancefloor just past the Sea Grape tree. Having the place all to ourselves felt magnificent but imagining 18 of our family members and a few friends joining us in paradise was a very pleasing exercise in imagination. Come to think of it, once we let the villa manager know our preferences as far as food and beverage went, there was very little left to do when we arrived. Kelly was our butler who saw to more than our every need. He may be part mind-reader mixed with all of his other attributes because at every turn he took what we were doing to the very next level.

One morning, prior to coffee, we decided to pop into the pool just because we could. Within minutes, coffee was being served to us in our perfectly drenched and content state. Noting how satisfied we were in our current position, a full Jamaican breakfast was served to us by Kelly himself. The days were filled with moments like that where he anticipated our every move and catered to those. There were moments by the fire pit just before sunset when handcrafted sundowners appeared. David's favorite cocktail with an elevated twist and my Amaretto infused beverage were, again, over the top delicious. Kelli never missed a beat when it came to service and the villa's private chef outdid himself meal after meal. It was not just that the food was exemplary, but the presentation was mind-blowing. From the freshest salad bowled in a dried coconut to a seashell turned gravy boat for our surf and turf entrée. Want to chat about immersion? We ate curried goat with rice and peas and nothing says Jamaican more than that. Breadfruit, ackee, fresh fish caught just off the shores of the villa and served fresh for lunch…there was no denying where we were and how good life was at Villa Bamidele.

We didn't leave the gorgeous grounds once we arrived via their BMW service right from the arrivals area of the Montego Bay airport to paradise. However, the entire island was at our disposal. All of the treasures on the South Coast were presented to us. As tempting as those were; Lovers Leap, YS Falls and Zipline, Black River Safari, Pelican Bar, Negril, and more, we needed nothing more than what lay before us. The sea lapping at our backyard, the watersports with our names all over them, a meandering garden filled with avocados, cherries, guavas, naseberry, coconuts and tons more fruit we could simply stroll and pick was enough for us. Besides, without the staff to anticipate our every need we would have probably found ourselves a bit lost at times. Who needs that sort of stress?

Next trip…we are definitely bringing friends and family along. This villa is worth sharing and spoiling everyone in your life with.

www.villabamidele.com

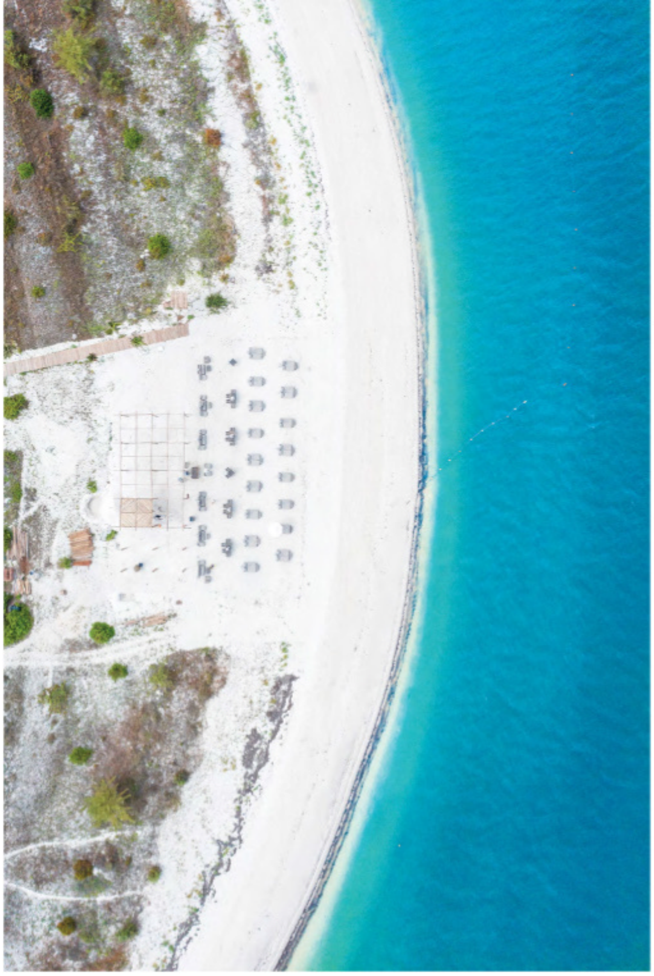
POSH

PARROTHEADS

BY **Jeff Sobel**

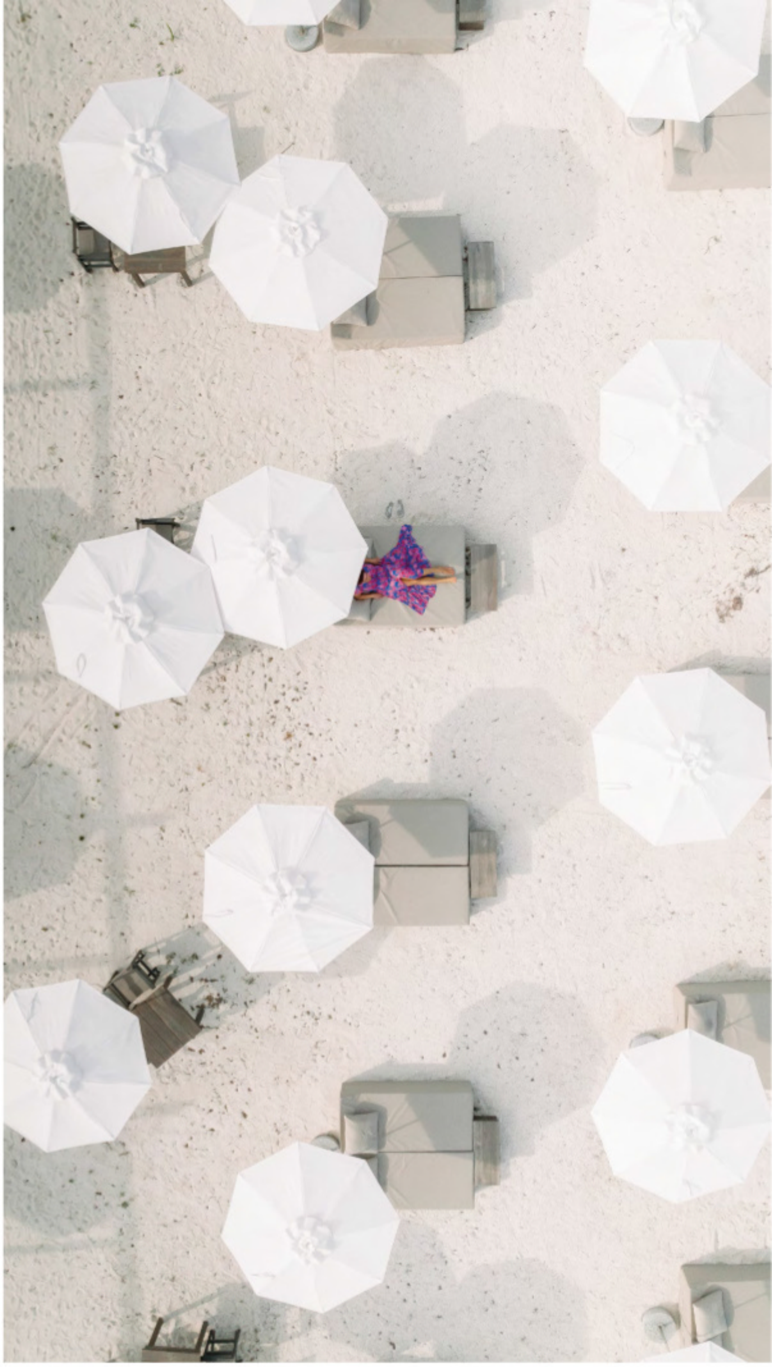
Adorable fishing boats line the pier as stray dogs play with one another and a baby manta ray ripples the water surrounding the ferry. It's a quick jaunt from the seaside town of Chiquila to Isla Holbox (pronounced ol-bosch). Those in the know have already heard of the charming island of Holbox, just two hours yet a world away from Cancun. The double-edged sword in reporting about Holbox is that by sharing this remarkable, relatively untouched paradise, we may open the world up to this unique hideaway. Fear not, for while this is the first of the newly branded St. Somewhere Resorts in the Margaritaville Island Reserve world, every detail has been scrutinized to not only provide guests with a luxe yet relaxed vacation but also preserve the natural splendor surrounding this salty piece of land.

My travel takes place in the brief rainy season, and while it is not currently raining, upon arrival I see that the sandy white clay dirt roads are for lack of a better word: flooded. This does not faze anyone, and certainly not me. As there are no automobiles on the island save for an occasional delivery truck, everyone gets around via foot, bike, ATV, or mostly golf carts. The sight of golf cart taxis jetting around the soaked dirt roads is surreal, adding to the magic of this island I never knew existed. A friendly driver approaches and helps to load my bag into the back of a souped-up golf cart, which I'm thankful for as we soon splash our way through town. Night has fallen so I don't get the full views, yet from what I see I'm already in love. The rickshaws wading through the streets look as though I might be in Thailand, while the art and murals passing by scream that perhaps I'm in Key West, and the thatched-roof bars dripping in twinkling lights protest that we must be in Tulum, all the while modern glass mansions whisper that I'm actually crisscrossing the High Line in Manhattan. Where am I?



LONE PALM

After a laughing good ride, I arrive at the Margaritaville St. Somewhere Resort behind white coral brick walls of what looks like a sandcastle. I'm greeted by the general manager and his team who offer me delicious green juice and help me get situated. The surrounding jungle emits sounds of nature while bubbling fountains quietly serenade me all the way to dinner at the onsite Harbour House restaurant. Nestled under a little lighthouse next to the sparkling pool, I'm treated to a bottle of Monte Xanic Gran Ricardo wine from Northern Mexico and a delicious mushroom soup that looks like a semi-science experiment with a dropper for syrup resting atop the crostini bridge.



I learn more about St. Somewhere which just opened in March 2022, and continues to expand and improve. While I thoroughly enjoyed my taxi adventure through town, our swankiest of readers who value time above all else will be pleased to hear that the resort will soon offer helicopter rides straight from Cancun, as well as a private dock to be built on site. This is the first in the Margaritaville family to offer a more boutique experience - an offshoot of the St. Somewhere Spa. The folks at Margaritaville snapped up this pristine property on the west end of the island, otherwise known as Punta Coco, arguably the best beach around, and where all the tours travel for nightly bioluminescent shows in the sea. The 39-suite resort (including seven suites with private plunge pools), offers nothing but waterfront views and many with direct access to the main pool and swim-up bar, in addition to the two restaurants and another bar.

Soon a caravan of mini grills burning brightly with charcoals arrive directly to the table, perfect for a group to share, and can even be served on the nearby beach. The feast consists of grilled steak, pork, chicken, shrimp, potatoes, and veggies. It's as if I'm at a luau without having to leave the chic restaurant.

In the morning, birds chirping outside my window act as the only alarm clock. I open the curtains and take in the room with daylight, noting every nautical detail from lights hanging with gears and ropes, to fish paintings, a porthole-shaped mirror, and countless other essentials and extravagances that one wouldn't expect on this rustic island (most of all being the only resort around with 24/7 air conditioning). A Tamarind mezcalita cocktail sits on the hand-crafted wooden table with a side of grasshoppers! Fully committing to the Margaritaville mantra of it's five o'clock somewhere, I give it a try (but pass on the grasshoppers).

After a rinse in the spacious walk-in shower I don my flip flops and greet the sunny day. All the buildings are connected by elevated wooden bridges so as not to disturb nature's ground below and the mangroves all around. The open-air lobby adds to the inside/outside appeal of the tropics, and the decor reflects the mix of simple yet stately lighthearted fun one would appreciate in the fusion of Hotbox and Margaritaville.

At the Harbour House I try a refreshing Mayan Chaya juice and sunny-side up egg chilaquiles with panela cheese and a side of locally made breads and jam that settle my soul. Afterwards, I'm filled with the energy to take on the high seas, walking to the beach where one of those adorable little boats waits right on the shore for a three island tour. Call me Gilligan or call me Jimmy, but there's just something 'bout a boat…

DAYDREAM
BELIEVER

My guide steers us into the great Gulf and a smile engraves itself on my face. With the sun shining and waves bubbling around, I soak in the peaceful paradise. Our first stop is the Yamaha Cenote, a type of nature preserve that offers not only refreshing and healing springs, but also a bar with hanging swings rather than stools. Crabs of all sizes and colors scatter amongst their multitude of holes, perhaps wishing to order a margarita of their own. The crystal-clear water of the springs welcomes me with a cool embrace in the hot morning, and with a life jacket I'm able to simply lie back and float. Just above the springs is a wooden tower which I dare to climb, and at the top it looks in all directions as though I've been transported to a safari in the Serengeti.

The boat glides me a short distance to the next island where it appears an impromptu sandbar party has broken out. A dozen or two boats rest right on the sandbar while groups of people and I wade around in the knee deep waters, with the blue sky breeze blowing wind through my hair. I follow a school of needle-nose fish shimmering in the sun and wish there was more time. It's a quick stop, but I take a mental note to return sometime soon with a cooler for my own sandbar party next time.

The final stop is mosquito island (I prefer bird island) on the other side of Holbox, which one cannot actually gain access to as it's off-limits to humans. This preserve is home to countless flamingos and other birds and wildlife, all suntanning on the sand and can't be bothered. The boat lets me off at a pier downtown where I pass by dozens of cute waterfront shops, bars, and cafes. Art seems to sprout not only from the ground but even from the water with sculptures and more murals. I plop down at the nearest wooden table right on the sand and order a Pacifico beer. I sit for a while, people-watching while a DJ housed in a booth over the water plays a song whose lyrics I can't translate but can feel all the same.

I stroll around town, stepping into one cute shop after the next. I reach a locals favorite pizza joint called Roots, with simple picnic tables surrounded by lush trees, hanging straw lanterns, and of course plenty of art. I order a local lager agave beer and don't even need to look at the menu to order their famous lobster pizza.

Later in the day, I walk back to the resort and cool off in the pool before rain clouds appear. I take mother nature's cue and return to my cozy room for a siesta. When I awake, I get dressed and head down to the Sand Bar restaurant to watch the pink cotton candy sunset stretch across the sky. Dinner begins with a "Who's to Blame" margarita, followed by another rich and creamy butternut squash soup. An extraordinary entree soon appears: baked chicken stuffed with ham, then blanketed with cheese as the Chef and his team introduce themselves, along with a torch lighter, to melt the creation together right before my eyes - dinner and a show!

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After a passionfruit cheesecake tart ornamented in berries and icing, we take a tequila-fueled expedition down to the peaceful darkness of the beach under cellphone lights to the Bioluminescent Bay. Similar to tracking the Northern Lights, successful viewings depend on a number of mother nature's whims including the time of year, weather, waves, and moon phase, but given the right conditions one can see the blue lights in the water upon disturbing the sea organisms. Disturbing them sounds negative, so instead I dance into the calm waves and shake my feet around, inciting small sparkles of what can only be described as sea fireflies. Regrettably, tonight they're not bright enough for my camera, so you dear reader will simply have to dance your way down here yourself.

In the morning, I climb to the crow's nest above the Harbour House for more revitalizing juice and a gouda and curd cheese quesadilla on blue corn tortillas and a side of tater tots to boot. Somehow, it's even sunnier than yesterday so I return to the beach and cast a kayak out to sea. I follow along the shore for a while, passing by one gorgeous waterfront home after the next. After the aqua workout, I return to a plush beachside bed and order a well-earned frozen margarita. As of this writing, a driftwood style beach club is under construction and will provide even more luxurious fun, and if Mr. Buffett felt so inclined for an impromptu concert, I humbly ask for a heads up to return upon its completion! Sipping the refreshing margarita under the hot sun, I watch pelicans dive for fish until I'm ready for a lunch of my own.

I'm in for yet another pampering poolside treat - I don't even have to leave the water because at St. Somewhere lunch sails to you! A sailing tray to be exact, a table-sized flotilla carrying armaments of mezcalitas in copper chalices, shrimp tacos, the freshest ceviche, chips and guacamole and much more. Many of the suites have step-in access to the pool, thus Margaritaville is redefining room service as these pool trays can float right to you. I soon see the contagious appeal as other guests spot my lunch and order trays of their own.

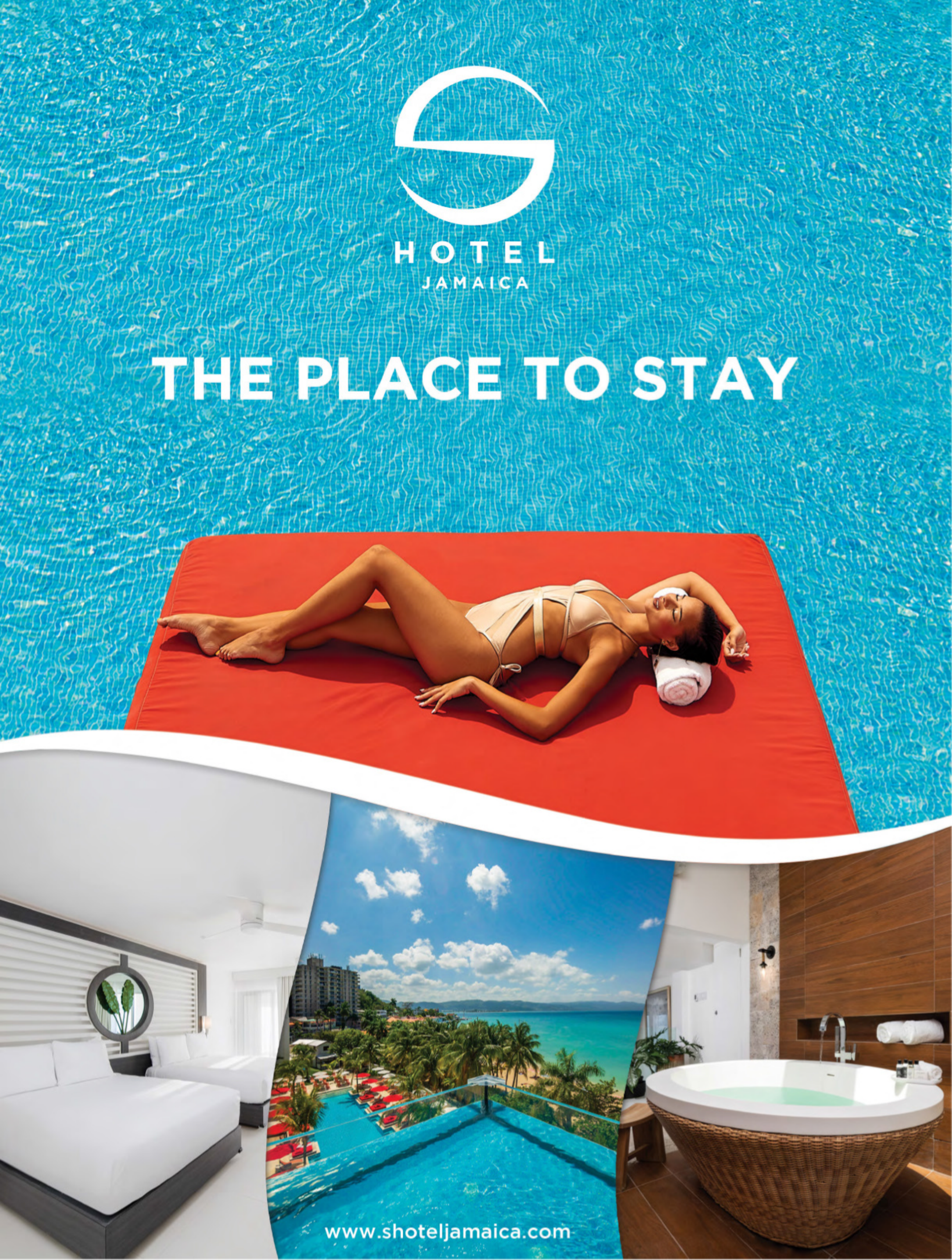
As a big supporter of the island's local businesses, the general manager and his chef take me on a tour into town not only to try a pink cheesecake ice cream for dessert, but we also visit the local bakery where the resort's breads are baked. While the term 'Margaritaville' may stem from my favorite American singer/philosopher, this is a Mexican resort through and through. It is just as important by the benefits and on property, staff housing, eco-renewal, and other charitable projects, not only on the property but the island itself that keeps with the mission statement, and island charm.

The resort offers sunset yoga to all the yogis wishing to sign up for a class, however I'm sorry to admit that I need another siesta on my balcony overlooking the pool, lighthouse, and beach before my next margarita.

I join the management team for a goodbye dinner with an impromptu tequila tasting test. Forget the limes! Instead, I'm taught to smell the tequila by my chest, then take a taste, swish it around so that my tastebuds can open and acclimate, then continue to sip. With a renewed interest in tequila, I pair the freshest sushi and sashimi with a Paloma. Tonight's soup broth bursts with so many different flavors that it's impossible to discern them all, and the flame torch returns, this time to light up the salmon sushi. All of these delicious treats could have been enough on their own, but the chef and his team appear with an amazing baked salmon encircled by a moat of passionfruit pink dots.

One could say that I took off for a weekend to try and recall the whole year, all of the faces and all of the places… But my quick trip is coming to a close, yet I managed to do so little and so much. I thank the entire staff for their generosity and kindness - truly going out of their way to make every guest feel welcome. Tanned, full, and having enjoyed just a taste of the Margaritaville luxe lifestyle, I will carry these memories with me until next time, as I now have a Caribbean soul I can barely control and Holbox hidden here in my heart.

Jeff Sobel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IF YOU LIKE

Piña Coladas

WALKING TOURS, AND PLANTAIN...

Come with me and I'll explain. It all started at the birthplace of the Piña Colada, the Caribe Hilton in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Ramon "Monchito" Marrero invented the cocktail in 1954 when a competition arose at the hotel. So our island experience began in the same lobby. The barback who worked with the originator is still there today, working in the same position and validating the hotel's claim to fame.In 2021, the Caribe Hilton made 54,207 piña coladas for guests. This month, we tried to break that record in just one weekend! No such luck, but we sure had fun trying.

OFFICIAL
DRINK
OF
Puerto
Rico
SOMBR

Staying at the Caribe, as I affectionately call it, puts guests in the center of all the action. The bustling city of San Juan, the airport, the modern attractions are all outside your window. If you're a walker, you can easily head into Old San Juan from the lobby as it's not that far and the ocean is always by your side, making it a fun island adventure. You'll pass forts and historic sites on your way up to the cobblestone streets. We took to those streets one afternoon to meet our walking food tour guide from Flavors of San Juan. We walked and ate and sipped and laughed. Our guide was a walking encyclopedia and foodie. She filled our bellies and our minds as we enjoyed every morsel of what she was dishing out. We made our own dish at one of our 6 stops along the Classic Old San Juan Tour. There was a cafe stop where the locally grown and roasted beans they used in our cortado (a small strong coffee with a dash of frothy milk) were the perfect balance between dark and lovely, rich and sophisticated. The cup of amazingness played second fiddle to the ham and cheese croissant that was accented by an unmissable guava butter. Although this stop was early in the tour, starting and ending here would have been satisfying. The warm sandwich set a very high bar for the remainder of the day. I will not give away all of the secrets of the tour and divulge the locations. I think experiencing smashing plantains, pairing rums and chocolates, and enjoying the quips of your guide are far more fun than popping in to Cuatro Sombras on your own. Oops!

Fine, you forced it out of me, but still take the tour, stay at the Caribe Hilton, sip on Piña Coladas if you have half a brain.

If you would like to try setting the tone before your next trip, below is the actual "Monchito" recipe to get you in the right frame of mind.

The Original Piña Colada Recipe:

2 oz white rum
1 oz coconut cream
1 oz heavy cream
6 oz fresh pineapple juice

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